



No Turning Back

As shown by the human experiences and ecological changes described in this book, the Yellowstone fires of 1988 were both an event that occurred at a specific time in social and natural history, and part of an ongoing process. Areas that burned are sometimes referred to as having returned to a “biological starting point,” but it is not the same point from which they started after the last fire, any more than we can go back to looking at fire in Yellowstone as we did before 1988.

Although large fires have occurred in the area for millennia, Yellowstone’s history is not simply one of repeated cycles. Instead of returning the park to some past primeval state, the 1988 fires used the materials at hand to shape the park’s future. The ecological processes that have formed the Yellowstone landscape in the past will continue to do so, but in different proportions, on different scales, and at different rates than in the past. What patterns emerge will depend on the pre-fire patterns in the landscape, the patterns left in 1988 by variations in fire type and severity, and post-fire conditions such as climate. Wildland areas are not destined to achieve some particular ideal state if we could remove the human influences. We can look back, but never turn back. If the trend toward a warmer, drier climate in Yellowstone continues, the abundance and distribution of plant and animal species will shift, and large fires may occur more frequently.

Just as the human presence in and around wildlands is inescapable, so is human intervention necessary to preserve wildlands. But interventions that diminish wilderness values should be pursued only when human communities are clearly threatened. It is disturbing when nature shows its muscle with more zeal than we would like: it seems that we want nature, but don’t want it to be completely natural; we want it to behave in a civilized manner. The question is whether Yellowstone, a public trust, should be a stage where nature is allowed to perform, making up the script as it goes along. But if this is not possible in Yellowstone, then where? ❁



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Chapter 6: Watershed and Stream Dynamics

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